

Testimony in Opposition to S.B. 839 An Act Concerning the Mergers and Consolidations of Various State Agencies

Monday, March 16, 2009

Submitted by: Colin Poitras

Greetings Sen. Slossberg, Sen. Meyer; Rep. Spallone, Rep. Aresimowicz and all the members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee.

I am writing today to express my opposition to S.B. 839 which calls for transferring the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) to the Office of the Attorney General and reducing associated staffing in the Office of the Child Advocate from 10 positions to one.

As a former reporter with the Hartford Courant, I reported on the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) and abused and neglected children in the state of Connecticut for approximately six years from 2002 to 2008. During that time, I had numerous interactions with the Office of the Child Advocate.

I have seen firsthand how Jeanne Milstein and her staff tirelessly advocate for and protect Connecticut's most vulnerable residents - its children. What is often overlooked however is the fact that the Office of Child Advocate also saves taxpayers money.

I do not know today what the total staffing and operations budget is for the Office of Child Advocate, but I believe that whatever expense the state accrues from fully funding the OCA is easily offset by the hundreds of thousands of dollars that is saved annually due to the office's proactive efforts in making sure troubled children receive proper placement and care.

The Office of the Child Advocate's incredible work keeping kids **OUT** of places like Riverview Hospital, Lake Grove School, the Connecticut Juvenile Training School and costly out-of-state facilities results in huge savings to the citizens of Connecticut. By pushing state agencies and service providers to design treatment plans that keep a child closer to

home and out of large institutions, I believe that the children are better off and state taxpayers benefit as these smaller, specialized programs are much less costly over time. I firmly believe that it is only through the OCA's vigilance that dozens, if not hundreds, of Connecticut children have avoided costly emergency care and prolonged stays in hospital emergency departments.

Sadly, time and time again we have seen Child Advocate Jeanne Milstein and her staff on the evening television news criticizing DCF for failing to properly plan, failing to properly protect and failing to properly monitor and care for the abused and neglected children of this state. It is only through the OCA's aggressive oversight and intervention - with the support and cooperation of the Office of Attorney General - that troubled facilities like Haddam Hills, Lake Grove, CJTS, Riverview and countless others have either been forced into corrective action or closed.

But those widely-publicized appearances do little to reflect the constant daily service provided by Ms. Milstein and her staff to the citizens of Connecticut. What is rarely seen is the day-in and day-out effort by Ms. Milstein, Associate Child Advocate Mickey Kramer and Assistant Child Advocates Julie McKenna, Heather Panciera, Moira O'Neill, Faith Vos Winkel, Christina Ghio and Elysa Gordon to protect children and make sure they receive adequate care. What taxpayers don't see are the phone calls that are made on behalf of children stuck in emergency rooms; the advocacy that takes place at DCF planning meetings so a child with special needs can transfer out of a large institution and return home and the countless hours spent reviewing records, searching medical charts, checking and double-checking, questioning and digging to make sure children receive the best medicine, the best care and the best treatment in a way that respects their dignity and their rights as human beings. The OCA's dedicated staff is often the resource of last resort for desperate parents and families frustrated with state bureaucracy and longing to find help for a loved one.

Today, the OCA continues to fight for better services for juvenile girls, better mental health and behavioral health support for children and adolescents in need and proper and timely placements of children in state foster care.

This is not work that one person can possibly accomplish on their own. If anything, I would argue that the OCA needs MORE staffing. The problems that have plagued the state's child welfare system for years continue despite the best efforts of the OCA and others. I am afraid to think how many children will lose the protection and supervision they desperately need if the OCA's staffing was to be reduced. The taxpayers of Connecticut and the children of Connecticut need the Office of Child Advocate in its current structure and form. I respectfully urge the members of this body **NOT** to support S.B. 839 as it pertains to moving the Office of the Child Advocate into the Office of the Attorney General.

Thank you for your time.

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